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Politics, media use and affective polarisation in Spain

Política, uso de medios y polarización afectiva en España

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Abstract

This research studies the relationship between the frequency with which political information is consumed through different media (television, social networks and digital newspapers) and the individual affective polarisation level, both toward parties in the abstract sense and toward the elites of those parties. To analyse this relationship, data from the Second National Survey of Political Polarisation in Spain, conducted in 2022 by CEMOP (the Murcian Centre for Public Opinion Studies), were used, and an analysis of differences in means with the ANOVA test carried out, to later apply multiple linear regression models that enable checking the influence of the frequency of use of media on the affective attitudes of Spaniards. The results confirm that those individuals who consume news more frequently are also those who are, on average, more polarised; at the same time, it is found that the greater consumption of information through social networks and digital newspapers increases the individual affective polarisation with regard to parties and their leaders. The more frequently political information is consumed, the more likely it is to come into contact with polarising content, hence the cognitive and attitudinal effects of the media will become more present.

Keywords

Mass Media; affective polarisation; information consumption; social networks; television; digital newspapers; selective exposure.

Resumen

Esta investigación estudia la relación que existe entre la frecuencia con la que se consume información de carácter político a través de distintos medios (televisión, redes sociales y periódicos digitales) y la polarización afectiva individual, tanto respecto a los partidos en sentido abstracto como respecto a los líderes de esos partidos. Con el fin de analizar esta relación, se emplean datos de la II Encuesta Nacional de Polarización Política en España, realizada en el año 2022 por el CEMOP, y se lleva a cabo, primero, un análisis de diferencias de medias con la prueba ANOVA, para más tarde aplicar modelos de regresión lineal múltiple que permiten comprobar la influencia de la frecuencia de uso de medios en las actitudes afectivas de los españoles. Los resultados confirman que aquellos individuos que consumen de forma más recurrente noticias son también los que de media están más polarizados y, al mismo tiempo, se constata que el mayor consumo de información a través de redes sociales y de periódicos digitales incrementa la polarización afectiva individual respecto a los partidos y a sus líderes. Cuanto más intensamente se consume información política, más aumenta la probabilidad de entrar en contacto con contenidos polarizantes y los efectos cognitivos y actitudinales de los medios se harán más presentes.

Palabras clave

Medios de comunicación; polarización afectiva; consumo de información; redes sociales; televisión; periódicos digitales; exposición selectiva.

1. Introduction

1.1 Affective polarisation as political polarisation of a social and emotional nature

Studies on affective polarisation define this phenomenon as a process of hostility and antagonism between groups which is created by the constitution of partisanship as a social identity (Iyengar et al., 2019). Thus, this division is caused by identity and emotions rather than ideological, rational thinking (Dias & Lelkes, 2022). According to the classical theories of Tajfel and Turner (1979), when we identify as members of a group, we tend to discriminate and have a negative perspective of other groups, while we value our own group positively. Therefore, affectively polarised individuals show a considerable difference in feeling in their attitudes to their own group and those of rival ones (Iyengar et al., 2012). This difference can be heightened by increased rejection and negativity towards those of other persuasions, even if the positive bond with the in-group is not strong (Bankert, 2021). We stress that political identity is not just expressed in a positive manner, negative partisanship has an important explanatory capacity within this climate of affective hostility. Despite this, some authors have questioned the notion of characterising an individual as being affectively polarised solely on the basis of their affective differences or by merely expressing rejection. They stress there must simultaneously be an intense attachment to one group whilst strongly rejecting another one (Klar et al., 2018).

In any event, in the process for creating partisan tribes an emotional distance grows between people and bias makes it difficult for people to live in harmony with those who do not share their views (Iyengar & Westwood, 2015). The conflict between partisan tribes is heightened and surpasses mere ideological differences and its influence on personal relationships becomes apparent (Huber & Malhotra, 2017; Rojo-Martínez and Crespo, 2023). Although the study on this phenomenon comes from the United States with research on the impact on negative political communication (Iyengar et al., 2012), later on interest was aroused in studying it in European multi-party systems (Harteveld, 2021; Knudsen, 2021; Wagner, 2021), while showing its important effects on society and institutions.

The approaches related to social identity were largely based on the proposed explanation of affective polarisation, thereby adding the theoretical body of psychosocial studies to political science. In a similar vein, other research has stressed the influence of elite behaviour on polarising the masses (Adams et al., 2022; Banda & Cluverius, 2018), on the changes which occur in party systems with the emergence of populist and radical parties (Harteveld et al., 2022; Moreno, 2021) and on the importance of contextual factors related to economic conditions and how electoral systems are designed (Gidron et al., 2020). Likewise, there has been some focus on changes in media strategy as elements which heighten political divide, favouring certain types of discourse and the most controversial or radical characters which provoke an unreal sensation of distance (Levendusky & Malhotra, 2016), and the effect of the social networks and consumption of online news (Törnberg et al., 2021).

Having indicated some of the explanatory variables of the phenomena, it is appropriate to outline what the strategies for measuring it are. According to Druckman and Levendusky (2019), the most typical way of measuring affective polarisation is a feeling thermometer which enables the distance between the emotional attachment to an in-group and the rejection we feel towards an out-group to be measured. The most common reference points for evaluating affection are parties in an abstract sense. However, some studies have gone into this in more depth indicating the differences in emotional reaction when evaluating a group, its group leaders and the people in general who belong to it. There is less rejection towards the general voters than towards the parties in general (Comellas, 2022). Other ways of measuring have focused on the attribution of personality traits, in the trend in establishing personal relationships and levels of trust which are linked to a perceived political identity (Druckman & Levendusky, 2019).

1.2. Affective polarisation and the media

The literature on polarisation and media usually comes from a theoretical model according to which political attitudes explain the conduct of selective exposition and this in turn reinforces pre-existing attitudes and beliefs, which heightens determined behaviour. This system of inter-relationships enables us to understand how choosing one media or another is a response to a need to promote one's social identity. Moreover, on receiving contents from this media with this purpose in mind, the preferences which lead to this choice are reinforced (Slater, 2007). This is known as the reinforcing spiral theory.

From the 1990's, the progressive fragmentation of the media has called into question the commercial profitability of moderate editorial lines. This has led to partisan media and communicators who do not target the general public but politically motivated niches of the population who are willing to assiduously consume this type of contents (Lelkes et al., 2017; Prior, 2013). On extending the range of media, especially with the advent of online media, it is far easier to find one which has an exact fit with our ideology. This makes it less likely we will expose ourselves to contents which are not aligned with our opinions or political stances (Sunstein, 2001), hence, the research which focuses on the general growth

in partisan bias on consuming news (Garret et al., 2014). This general scenario creates spirals of attitude reinforcement which make it difficult to tone down this identity (Beam et al., 2019).

The rise of more partisan media activity, in those which prioritise opinion over fact, and which clearly have narratives that support a political stance, can be explained by a series of technological and legal changes which have enabled many operators to access the television and radio market and the press (Levendusky, 2013). Although partisan media represents a minority, their influence can stretch beyond their followers and can affect the whole of public life (Druckman et al., 2017). In any event, they have emerged with the proliferation of a model for processing political information which is dominated by conflict. For example, Teruel-Rodríguez states that on private Spanish television the amount of screen time given to tense and fervent political chat shows has shot up (2016: 217). Everyday, these programmes show rhetorical diatribes to win over their audiences by means of entertainment and controversy. Berry and Sobieraj (2016) describe this process in America as the rise in the "outrage industry" which endorses negative communication and tarnishing opponents as new business strategies.

Changes in the media ecosystem, which have become a hybrid and fragmented environment (Chadwick, 2017), and the fall in neutral news spaces have fostered more polarised attitudes in audiences by raising the cognitive bias with which the environment and the distorted perceptions of opponents are processed (Garrett et al., 2019; Wilson et al., 2020). However, the underlying mechanism for this relationship should be mentioned. In the media as diversified as that we have today, most people consume news from sources whose political stance is known, and they are chosen according to a selective pattern of exposure in which information which is aligned to the predispositions of the individual is provided (Stroud, 2014). However, we must be cautious about asserting that the extensive consumption of partisan media is in itself the primary cause of affective hostile reactions. In fact, what it does is heighten attitudes and identities which are already dormant or tempered in the individual (Iyengar et al., 2019; Levendusky, 2013). As stated at the beginning of this section, one must question stances in which a clear cause and effect relationship between the consumption of media and affective polarisation is asserted in so far as such consumption can be attributed to the political ideology of the individuals concerned. However, although the attitudes are not derived from the media, the media can activate or reinforce them (Slater, 2007). The evidence gathered supports the notion that one's individual political identity causes them to selectively consume certain contents, and this is what heightens their identity, thereby exacerbating polarisation between different groups (Gvirsman, 2014; Knobloch-Westerwick, 2014; Lu & Lee, 2019).

Authors such as Tsfati and Nir (2017) state that selective exposure linked to partisan media heightens affective polarisation because on coming into contact with this type of contents, certain frame effects come into play which have an influence on our affective responses. Selective exposure delimits our tools for interpreting and with these tools the media has, the public react emotionally. The study by Tsfati and Nir (2017), in conjunction with works by Scheufele and Iyengar (2014) on frame effects remind us that the way a topic is presented has more influence than any rational debate on it. Previously, research by Garrett et al. (2014) confirmed the influence of exposure to information which is aligned to our perceptions and on activating emotions about the in-group and the out-group, which move further apart the more we immerse ourselves in these kind of media narratives. This premise seems logical: if we just receive news in which we are portrayed as good and the other group as villains, the differences in affection soon grow. Also Stroud (2010) links the relationship between selective partisan exposure in all kinds of media (newspapers, radio, television, Internet) and ever more polarised attitudes, a conclusion which he supports with certain tests which show an inverse relationship.

Focusing on these assertions, it may be understood that audiences tend to behave with selective exposure, a practice which avoids news which clashes with their viewpoint, and which may affect their sensations and emotions (Garret et al., 2014). This is the general pattern for consuming media in any format. If we take a more in-depth look at what happens on the social networks, we can see that the trend in selective exposure is linked to the establishment of polarised and internally homogenous digital communities which operate as a type of echo chambers (Quattrociocchi et al., 2016) which promote homophily in interaction. That is, there is an inclination to contact users who share the same ideology (Valera-Ordaz et al., 2018). Although there are many broadcasters on social networks and there are more opportunities to participate, a phenomenon has arisen within this context which is known as the cacaphony of voices (Waldherr, 2018): a constant repetition of the same ideas, which cancels out any potential they have for pluralism. However, some researchers state that digital communication has enabled higher than usual contact with the out-group (Flaxman et al., 2016). Polarisation cannot always be explained by the effects of reinforcing one's identity in which news is consumed to validate one's own viewpoint. If consumers come into contact with content which shows an opposing viewpoint, this may create emotional resistance and they may feel threatened. Therefore, they may also end up polarised (Bail et al., 2018; Dahlgren, 2022).

In short, research on affective polarisation and the media has essentially focused on the effects of selective exposition. According to this notion, the more we segregate our consumption, the more we reinforce our beliefs and the more vehemently we defend them. At the same time, we carry on believing that our ideas are correct on the basis of the evidence we have gathered. Conversely, against the hypothesis of selective exposition as being an element underlying the influence of polarised media, studies on social networks warn these new platforms increase contact with content that show an opposing view. However, this does not decrease polarisation, and thus once again this shows that not just homogeneity polarises, but intergroup interaction does so too (Törnberg, 2022).

To show these two viewpoints, in the debate between the relationship between media and polarisation there seems to be an analysis on all kinds of contents which is consumed in relation to consumer preferences, as well as the nature of each media (both its partisan nature and the reasoning behind its *modus operandi*). This comes with a reflection on the smearing of traditional media, in which consumption of new, more alternative sources of news, but more biased ones too are promoted (Wilson et al., 2020). As it is impossible to reach a consensus on objective sources, we normalise biased information. If we think along the lines of media and food diets, not only is the type of food and its content (nutrition) important, but also the amount consumed too. There are vast amounts of proof in one direction or another on the effects of selective exposition (the content). We also stress the studies on the effects some specific media have on polarisation (the type). On the Internet and social networks, many studies question whether digital communication is a marked explanatory cause of polarisation (Boxell et al., 2017; Waisbord, 2020). This is especially true when the patterns of interaction and emotional expression seem different between networks such as Twitter, WhatsApp or Facebook, and it is not possible to compare them in terms of their polarising nature (Yarchi et al., 2021).

However, there are few approaches which focus on the importance of consumption frequency, which is surprising. Given that the current media ecosystem increases polarising news stimulants (both when it favours content which validates our viewpoints and when it makes us react against them by putting us in contact with evidence we perceive as threatening by means of the social networks) the level of media consumption can become a factor in predicting polarisation levels. The more the media is consumed, the more probable it will be we come into contact with polarising stimulus or elements which reinforce our identity. Some authors have already explored this link. Lee et al. (2022) found that greater consumption of news on social networks has a positive relationship with affective polarisation. Lee et al. (2018) showed that the most active consumers of social networks were more active politically and this, in turn, made them more extreme. There is also evidence which supports the opposing view. Recently, Torcal (2023) applied this focus to show the impact of Twitter, and concluded there is no significant difference in individual affective polarisation in terms of how frequently this network is used. Nordbrandt (2021) has a temporary evolution perspective to show that when one starts consuming social networks intensely it does not influence affective polarisation, but the opposite cause-effect situation is true. The lack of works which include in the same analysis the relationships between levels at which different media are consumed (within a hybrid system) and levels of affective polarisation, and the fact that existing ones have not reached similar results means we feel encouraged to keep on adding to this debate.

2. Methodology

This research aims to analyse the impact of the frequency of using different kinds of media (television, social networks and online newspapers) for consuming the news and finding out about politics, and its effect on individual affective polarisation. The high following of current politics increases the probability of being exposed to content which validates our viewpoint, biased content and negative communicative messages about opponents. It also shows an interest in politics. On the social networks, it is also more probable to find messages from opponents which may make us have an adverse reaction to them. All these contents can reinforce rejection of the out-group and favour the in-group. Although, the range of the diet and the type of content which dominate it are important, we begin with a simpler premise: the stronger the diet, the higher the risk is that it contains polarising elements or even that the identity reinforcement spiral is at work. This is part of an extensive reflection on specialized literature: the attempt to link media criteria with the different effects these media have (Weaver, 1980). Traditionally, one's level of knowledge about politics has been associated with greater tolerance, but this link has been called into question in recent years (Suk et al., 2022). Changes in the media ecosystem promote a kind of content which makes us question the positive effects of being more "informed" and the true nature of this "political enlightenment". Moreover, some authors have analysed the mediator and reinforcement roles psychological commitment has in politics in the expression of affective polarisation among more educated individuals (Han, 2022).

Having defined the problem, throughout the research our aim is to respond to two main questions:

RQ1. Are there significant differences in affective polarisation levels according to how often news-political content on the television, social networks and digital newspapers are consumed?

RQ2. Is the frequency at which the three media consumed deemed to be an explanatory factor in individual affective polarisation?

To respond to these research questions, it is essential to consider some hypothesis which systemise the relationship expected between the variables:

- H1. Individuals who are the most recurrent media consumers are also the most affectively polarized, both in terms of parties and leaders.
- H2. Greater consumption of the media helps explain greater levels of individual affective polarisation, both towards parties and their leaders.

In order to verify these hypotheses, we use data from the “II National Survey on Political Polarisation” carried out by the Murcian Centre for Public Opinion Studies (CEMOP) from 25th April to 18th May 2022. This was a survey carried out with the CATI system on a representative sample of the population in Spain on 1236 people of both genders aged 18 and over. The error sample in order to have a confidence level of 95.5% (two sigmas) and $P=Q$, was $\pm 2.8\%$. The sampling procedure was stratified multistage in which the final selection of individuals was based on quotas for sex and age and strata was created by contrasting the 17 regions and Ceuta and Melilla with different categories for size of habitat. The variables considered, their encoding and the descriptive statistics which reflect the composition of the sample can be found in Tables 1a and 1b.

Table 1a: Encoding for variables used and descriptive statistics

Variable and classification of variable in the model	Encoding and descriptive frequencies
Individual affective polarisation towards parties calculated from the feeling thermometer about parties, and the Wagner formula (2021). Dependent variable 1.	M=2.3382 DT=1.30732 R= [0-5]
Individual affective polarisation towards leaders calculated from the feeling thermometer about leaders and the Wagner formula (2021). Dependent variable 2.	M=2.2923 DT=1.29458 R= [0-5]
Gender. Control variable.	Men (0) =594, 48.1% Women (1) =642, 51.9%
Age. Control variable.	M=50.12 DT=16.176 R= [18-93]
Educational level (dummy). Control variable.	Non-university graduates (0)=709, 58.0% University graduates (1)=513, 42.0%
Positions oneself on the far left (recoding of self-positioning as a dichotomous variable, taking positions 1-2-3 as FL). Control variable.	No FL (0) =834, 70.1% Yes FL (1) =356, 29.9%
Positions oneself on the far right (recoding of self-positioning as a dichotomous variable, taking positions 8-9-10 as FR). Control variable.	No FR (0) =1023, 86.0% Yes FR (1) =167, 14.0%
Positive party identity PSOE (PPID) (recoding of the 0-10 scale for party support/rejection, taking scores 8-9-10 as indicating a positive partisan identity). Control variable.	No PPID (0) =1060, 87.5% Yes PPID (1) =151, 12.5%
Positive party identity PP (PPID) (recoding of the 0-10 scale for party support/rejection, taking scores 8-9-10 as indicating a positive partisan identity). Control variable.	No PPID (0) =1063, 87.6% Yes PPID (1) =150, 12.4%
Positive party identity Vox (PPID) (recoding of the 0-10 scale for party support/rejection, taking scores 8-9-10 as indicating a positive partisan identity). Control variable.	No PPID (0) =1062, 87.6% Yes PPID (1) =150, 12.1%
Positive party identity Unidas Podemos (PPID) (recoding of the 0-10 scale for party support/rejection, taking scores 8-9-10 as indicating a positive partisan identity). Control variable.	No PPID (0) =1099, 91.0% Yes PPID (1) =109, 9.0%

Source: own elaboration from the CEMOP II National Survey on Political Polarisation.

Table 1b: Encoding for variables used and descriptive statistics.

Variable and classification of variable in the model		Encoding and descriptive frequencies
Frequency different media are consumed for news-politics. Independent explanatory variable	TV	Everyday (1) = 782, 63.4% Three or four days per week (2) = 206, 16.7% One or two days per week (3) = no data. Less frequently (4) = no data. Hardly ever or never (5) = 246, 19.9%
	Social networks	Everyday (1) = 460, 38.0% Three or four days per week (2) = 124, 10.2% One or two days per week (3) = 134, 11.1% Less frequently (4) = no data. Hardly ever or never (5) = 416, 34.3%
	Digital newspapers	Everyday (1) = 434, 35.7% Three or four days per week (2) = 133, 10.9% One or two days per week (3) = 139, 11.4% Less frequently (4) = 83, 6.8% Hardly ever or never (5) = 427, 35.1%

Source: own elaboration from the CEMOP II National Survey on Political Polarisation.

To measure the dependent variable, individual affective polarisation, we take the proposal by Wagner (2021) for multi-party systems such as in Spain. This formula stems from the scores individuals give in a feeling thermometer on different parties or leaders. Taking the parties as an evaluation reference point, this thermometer requests the interviewees to express their feelings about the four main national political parties on a scale from 0-10 (0=dislike and rejection; 10=sympathy and support): PSOE, PP, Vox and Unidas Podemos. As for the leaders, the same feeling thermometer approach is used, but here the subject evaluated is changed: Pedro Sánchez, Alberto Núñez Feijóo, Santiago Abascal and Yolanda Díaz. The Wagner formula (2021) is applied with its unweighted version, as the significance of each object in relation to polarisation dynamics was deemed may not necessarily have any relationship to the percentage of votes. One might think there are agents which have great capacity to engage with the emotional reactions of people, who may also have become a focal point for political debate, without them being statistically significant in term of votes or having more seats than others.

From the scores for supporting and rejecting awarded to parties and leaders, the following calculation was made by applying the Wagner formula (2021: 4):

$$\sqrt{\frac{\sum_{p=1}^p (\text{like}_{ip} - \bar{\text{like}}_i)^2}{n_p}}$$

The aim of this formula is to capture the spread of scores in terms of the different parties or leaders on the scale. To do so, the score given by an individual to a party is taken away from the score given to each of the other parties. A total is made for each of these subtractions or differences in scores squared. Next, an average is taken for the total and divided by the total number of parties or leaders, here it is four, and the square root of this average is then calculated.

Having clarified the formula for calculating the dependent variable, we show that, in response to RQ1 and H1, an analysis was made of the differences in averages with the ANOVA ^[2] test, extending the results with *post-hoc* tests and effect size calculations. Moreover, for RQ2 and H2 two linear regression models were created ^[3], which enabled us to predict the value of our dependent variable (individual affective polarisation towards parties and leaders) according to the value given for the level at which an individual consumes the media. Sociodemographic factors and other variables are used to ensure these were previously indicated as elements from where the affective polarisation originated. Starting with the general expression for the linear regression models ($Y=a+\beta X+ \epsilon$), we can formalise our two models which are in turn applied to each of our dependent variables:

Model 1a. Y_i (individual affective polarisation towards parties) = $\beta_0 + \beta_1$ (PPID_{PSOE}) + β_2 (PPID_{PP}) + β_3 (PPID_{VOX}) + β_4 (PPID_{UP}) + β_5 (FL) + β_6 (FR) + β_7 (Gender) + β_8 (Age) + β_9 (Educational level) + ϵ

Model 1b. Y_i (individual affective polarisation towards parties) = $\beta_0 + \beta_1$ (PPID_{PSOE}) + β_2 (PPID_{PP}) + β_3 (PPID_{VOX}) + β_4 (PPID_{UP}) + β_5 (FL) + β_6 (FR) + β_7 (Gender) + β_8 (Age) + β_9 (Educational level) + β_{10} (Frequency at which TV is consumed) + β_{11} (Frequency at which social networks are consumed) + β_{12} (Frequency at which digital newspapers are consumed) + ϵ

Model 1a. Y_i (individual affective polarisation towards leaders) = $\beta_0 + \beta_1(\text{PPID}_{\text{PSOE}}) + \beta_2(\text{PPID}_{\text{PP}}) + \beta_3(\text{PPID}_{\text{VOX}}) + \beta_4(\text{PPID}_{\text{UP}}) + \beta_5(\text{FL}) + \beta_6(\text{FR}) + \beta_7(\text{Gender}) + \beta_8(\text{Age}) + \beta_9(\text{Educational level}) + \varepsilon$

Model 1b. Y_i (individual affective polarisation towards leaders) = $\beta_0 + \beta_1(\text{PPID}_{\text{PSOE}}) + \beta_2(\text{PPID}_{\text{PP}}) + \beta_3(\text{PPID}_{\text{VOX}}) + \beta_4(\text{PPID}_{\text{UP}}) + \beta_5(\text{FL}) + \beta_6(\text{FR}) + \beta_7(\text{Gender}) + \beta_8(\text{Age}) + \beta_9(\text{Educational level}) + \beta_{10}(\text{Frequency at which TV is consumed}) + \beta_{11}(\text{Frequency at which social networks are consumed}) + \beta_{12}(\text{Frequency at which digital newspapers are consumed}) + \varepsilon$

3. Results

In relation to RQ1 and H1, in Table 2 and Table 3 we show the differences in average individual affective polarisation in terms of parties and leaders according to the consumption frequency categories for the three media. The results show that in the most continuous consumption categories, the averages for affective polarisation are always higher. In particular, we can confirm that those who consume television, social networks and digital newspapers on a daily basis are on average more polarised affectively than those who do not follow the news on a daily basis. As this following grows, so too does average polarisation, both towards a party and the leaders. These differences, seen in the bivariate analysis, show statistically significant results.

However, we must qualify that conclusion. With the Eta squared test (η^2) on estimating the size of the effect, we can state that, both with affective polarisation towards parties and leaders, the difference between groups is larger when we analyse the five criteria for consumption on social networks. For this media alone the extent of the effect measured by η^2 may be considered as moderate. For example, with affective polarisation towards parties, the individuals who consumed this media everyday had on average a difference of over 0.62 points in respect to those who never or hardly ever consumed it. However, if we analyse the difference in this type of polarisation between the extreme categories of television consumption, the result falls to 0.5462. With digital newspapers, there is less difference between these two categories (0.4145). The results in which affective polarisation towards leaders is taken as a reference point shows similar trends, with the only nuance being that the differences between the consumption categories between "everyday" and "hardly ever or never" are slightly more marked than in partisan polarisation (0.52380).

Finally, we apply *post-hoc* contrasts for multiple comparisons by means of the Bonferroni test to take a more in-depth look at the results of the ANOVA test on the significance of the average differences (I-J). With ANOVA we can see whether there are differences among categories of the independent variable but we do not know exactly if these occur between all categories or just some of them. Taking the results of affective polarisation towards parties and television consumption, the significant differences between pairs of categories occur between those who watch this media "everyday" and those who watch it "hardly ever or never", we could not see any significant differences between those who watch television "everyday" and those who do so "three or four days a week" and between those who consume it "three or four days per week" and those who "hardly ever or never" consume it. We must remember that in our media there are no registries for television consumption in two categories ("one or two days per week" and "less frequently"). Regarding affective polarisation towards parties and consumption of social networks, once again the significant difference in the most marked media occurs between those who follow social networks "everyday" and those who do so "hardly ever or never" as well as those who state they consume them "three or four times per week" and those who do so "hardly ever or never". The extreme categories above and below show different groups for affective attitudes. Lastly, the data on affective polarisation towards parties and consumption of digital newspapers confirms the same pattern in multiple comparisons: the most important differences are between the strongest consumption category and null or almost null consumption. The analysis by media and categories for affective polarisation towards leaders shows the same trends.

In short, we can see individuals who consume the media most often are also those who are most polarised affectively, both in terms of parties and leaders (H1). These differences are more marked when we see the diets of the individuals in terms of their news consumption on social networks. It seems that it is this media which most clearly shows consumption is linked to some kind of attitude-related response. This can also lead us to believe that the levels of consumption on social networks show the strength of individual political engagement more than any other media, as well as the need to receive news that validates one's own beliefs or exposure to polarising stimulants from the in-group or out-group. Apart from that, it can be seen that the strength at which political information is demanded is linked to affective polarisation.

Table 2. Differences in average affective polarisation towards parties according to how often different media are consumed.

Frequency of television consumption	M AP parties (sd)	N	ANOVA test and Eta squared (η^2)
Everyday	2.4641 (1.26497)	763	*** F=16.432 $\eta^2=.027$
Three or four days per week	2.3629 (1.22227)	197	
Hardly ever or never	1.9179 (1.42239)	241	
Total	2.3379 (1.30782)	1201	
Frequency at which social networks are consumed	M AP parties (sd)	N	ANOVA test and Eta squared (η^2)
Everyday	2.6022 (1.26852)	455	*** F=13.180 $\eta^2=.043$
Three or four days per week	2.4648 (1.24936)	122	
One or two days per week	2.4319 (1.08944)	129	
Less frequently	2.1715 (1.31345)	76	
Hardly ever or never	1.9849 (1.35241)	397	
Total	2.3337 (1.30672)	1179	
Frequency at which digital newspapers are consumed	M AP parties (sd)	N	ANOVA test and Eta squared (η^2)
Everyday	2.5164 (1.22447)	426	*** F=6.239 $\eta^2=.021$
Three or four days per week	2.4364 (1.13870)	131	
One or two days per week	2.4866 (1.16604)	137	
Less frequently	2.2033 (1.30647)	82	
Hardly ever or never	2.1019 (1.45076)	407	
Total	2.3398 (1.30905)	1183	

Source: own elaboration. ***p<0.01, **p<0.05

Table 3. Differences in average affective polarisation towards leaders according to how often different media are consumed.

Frequency of television consumption	M AP leaders (sd)	N	ANOVA test and Eta squared (η^2)
Everyday	2.4338 (1.26101)	743	*** F=16.004 η^2 =.027
Three or four days per week	2.1856 (1.25653)	185	
Hardly ever or never	1.8802 (1.35681)	208	
Total	2.2920 (1.29512)	1136	
Frequency at which social networks are consumed	M AP leaders (sd)	N	ANOVA test and Eta squared (η^2)
Everyday	2.5848 (1.26215)	435	*** F=12.361 η^2 =.043
Three or four days per week	2.3656 (1.24911)	116	
Three or four days per week	2.2551 (1.20745)	121	
Less frequent	2.1358 (1.30780)	75	
Hardly ever or never	1.9632 (1.29428)	367	
Total	2.2912 (1.29448)	1114	
Frequency at which digital newspapers are consumed	M AP leaders (sd)	N	ANOVA test and Eta squared (η^2)
Everyday	2.5307 (1.21741)	412	*** F=9.206 η^2 =.032
Three or four days per week	2.4544 (1.17371)	125	
Three or four days per week	2.3688 (1.24845)	131	
Less frequent	2.1227 (1.18868)	79	
Hardly ever or never	2.0069 (1.39186)	371	
Total	2.3006 (1.29370)	1118	

Source: own elaboration. ***p<0.01, **p<0.05

So far, we have only established there is a certain degree of association between our two variables of interest (frequency at which the media is consumed and individual affective polarisation). This is an association which seems to be more intense in the digital sphere. We need to develop our multivariate analysis models to respond to our RQ2 and test our H2. To be specific, we chose a multiple linear regression analysis to predict the value of individual affective polarisation towards parties and leaders according to frequency of media consumption, controlling this relationship with a series of covariables

which make up some of the main factors which explain the phenomenon outlined in the literature. To be specific, we use ideological extremism (Rogowski & Sutherland, 2016), positive identification with different parties (Días & Lelkes, 2022), gender (Mayordomo-Zapata, 2021; Ondercin and Lizotte, 2021), age (Phillips, 2022) and educational level (Han, 2022) as control variables for the relationship to be checked against H2. The equations made for the models is shown in the methodology section.

Table 4 shows the results of the two models used for explaining affective polarisation towards parties. We can see the frequency at which social networks ($\beta = -.057$, $p < 0.05$) and digital newspapers ($\beta = .068$, $p < 0.01$) are consumed sheds a great deal of light on explaining individual affective polarisation towards parties, which does not occur with television. Thus, we can partially verify our H2. The coefficient confirms the relationship we saw in the bivariate analysis: the higher the consumption of these media (tendency towards 1 on the scale) the more the dependent variable grows. The results of table 5 on affective polarisation towards leaders shows a similar trend: the frequency at which online media is consumed helps to explain individual affective polarisation. Likewise, the average change which the dependent variable undergoes is stronger according to consumption of digital newspapers than with social networks. This result is not surprising if we bear in mind the continuous spread of digital newspapers in our country with diatribes on one side or another of the political divide.

With these results, one may conclude that the strength of news diets from digital newspapers is a factor which influences affectively polarised attitudes. This may occur for different reasons. First, in the digital sphere, there is a greater range of media and also a larger number of partisan media. Therefore, the more time spent in these environments, the more difficult it will be to avoid contact with polarising content or broadcasters (both validating content and that which elicits rejection by exposure to messages from opponents). Meanwhile, the very features of the digital communities and the means of access to news on social networks, measured by algorithms and echo chambers, can reinforce selective exposure trends, contact with narratives which encourage inter-groupal hostility and the creation of a false sense of polarisation. Lastly, these results encourage us to explore the future possibility that the profile for "strong consumer" of digital news corresponds to people who have a high level of political commitment and a strong identity. Thus, they constantly need information in order to justify their stances. This also reflects a constant need for orientation. Furthermore, the results from the covariables used as statistical control mechanisms show how important partisan identity is (above ideology) and reveals Vox and PSOE supporters as being the key players in the affective conflicts in Spain. Likewise, the sociodemographic variables do not seem to have a marked influence on either of the two types of affective polarisation under consideration. Only age shows a significant influence on all models and yields a result in keeping with those obtained by Phillips (2022): polarisation grows as people grow old.

Table 4. Analysis of multiple linear regression from the effect of the frequency at which different media are consumed on individual affective polarisation towards parties ¹⁴.

	Model 1a AP parties			Model 1b AP parties		
	B (E)	p	VIF	B (E)	p	VIF
Positive party identity (PPID) (ref.: no PPID)						
PPID PSOE	.302 (.088)	***	1.138	.292 (.087)	***	1.145
PPID PP	.262 (.094)	***	1.210	.255 (.093)	***	1.219
PPID Vox	.355 (.094)	***	1.251	.352 (.094)		1.270
PPID PP	.257 (.103)	***	1.170	.248 (.102)	**	1.186
Far left (ref.: no EI)	.169 (.067)	***	1.258	.167 (.067)	***	1.260
Far right (ref.: no ED)	.156 (.093)	***	1.233	.155 (.092)	***	1.339

	Model 1a AP parties			Model 1b AP parties		
	B	p	VIF	B	p	VIF
Gender (ref.: male)	-.007 (.056)		1.037	.001 (.056)		1.051
Educational level (ref.: non-graduates)	.033 (.056)		1.022	.013 (.057)		1.072
Age	.052 (.002)	**	1.081	.052 (.002)	**	1.155
Consumption of political information						
TV				-.033 (.019)		1.162
Social networks				-.057 (.018)	**	1.292
Digital newspapers				-.068 (.018)	***	1.281
Constant	1.367	***		1.716	***	
R ²	.489			.502		
R ² adjusted	.485			.497		
N (according to list)			1122			

Source: own elaboration. ***p<0.01, **p<0.05. Note: standard errors appear in parentheses.

Table 5. Analysis of multiple linear regression from the effect of the frequency at which different media are consumed on individual affective polarisation towards leaders ^[5].

	Model 1a AP leaders			Model 1b AP leaders		
	B (E)	p	VIF	B (E)	p	VIF
Positive party identity (PPID) (ref.: no PPID)						
PPID PSOE	.251 (.101)	***	1.146	.238 (.099)	***	1.152
PPID PP	.191 (.107)	***	1.208	.180 (.105)	***	1.220
PPID Vox	.287 (.108)	***	1.255	.285 (.107)	***	1.270
PPID PP	.230 (.119)	***	1.173	.216 (.118)	***	1.195
Far left (ref.: no EI)	.175 (.077)	***	1.254	.173 (.076)	***	1.254
Far right (ref.: no ED)	.109 (.106)	***	1.314	.110 (.105)	***	1.335
Gender (ref.: male)	-.037 (.065)		1.038	-.024 (.064)		1.050

	Model 1a AP leaders		Model 1b AP leaders		
Educational level (ref.: non-graduates)	.050 (.065)	**	1.024	.017 (.065)	1.074
Age	.124 (.002)	***	1.078	.127 (.002)	** 1.151
Consumption of political information					
TV				-.032 (.022)	1.144
Social networks				-.078 (.020)	*** 1.262
Digital newspapers				-.116 (.020)	*** 1.256
Constant	1.179	***		1.664	***
R ²	.359			.387	
R ² adjusted	.354			.380	
N (according to list)			1048		

Source: own elaboration. ***p<0.01, **p<0.05. Note: standard errors appear in parentheses.

4. Discussion and conclusions

The conclusions this research has come to aims to enrich the debate on the topic, and attempts to analyse the relationships there are between the degree of consumption of different types of media which include news-politics content and individual affective polarisation. Although there are different studies based on affective polarisation and the media (Stroud, 2010; Flaxman et al., 2016; Tsati & Nir, 2017; Rojo-Martínez et al., 2023; Torcal, 2023), there is a dearth of integrated research into studies on the level at which different media is used, assuming there is a hybrid media system, and analysis according to the degree of individual affective polarisation.

In this respect, the debate revolves around whether more intense consumption of the media has an influence on greater individual affective polarisation. Having obtained the results, it can be confirmed there is a relationship between the dependent variable, individual affective polarisation, the independent variable and the level at which the different types of media are followed. This relationship is reflected in the following manner: when individuals constantly consume news, regardless of whether they do so on the television, social networks or digital newspapers, average affective polarisation reaches higher levels than for other individuals who do not consume news on a daily basis. Moreover, among the results obtained it can be seen that the differences are most significant when consumption is taken to an extreme. That is, when the averages are compared for those who consume different kinds of media on a daily basis as opposed to those who hardly ever or never do so. Therefore, H1 which links media consumption and affective polarisation towards parties and leaders, can be confirmed. In this way, when then there is a pattern of high consumption of news, it is more probable that sensational, polarising news will be encountered or that this concerns an individual who is demanding in terms of needing content which validates one's beliefs and reinforces one's identity.

Regarding H2, which starts with the notion that greater use of different media (as shown in this research) can explain higher levels of individual affective polarisation towards parties and their leaders, the results partly confirm this. The statistical models which have been implemented to delimit this hypothesis conclude that, although the frequency with which news contents are consumed on social networks and digital newspapers has a significant effect on affective polarisation (boosting it), the same cannot be said for television. This may be due to different factors, but the most important may be they are linked to the type of content which dominates these environments. On social networks or news websites, people find frameworks and narratives which they are less likely to consume on television. Moreover, significant data are linked to consumption of online information, as consuming it in a context that is more fragmented (due to the amount of news presented) tends to evoke greater amount of affective

polarisation in individuals in terms of their political attitudes. This concurs with the *modus operandi* that defines a large amount of digital communities. Likewise, we can infer that consumption of these digital media is more demonstrative of an interest in politics than consumption of traditional media such as television. It is this interest in politics in particular which has been outlined by other research as a factor which can extend affective polarisation (Han, 2022).

Lastly, we must stress that our independent variable has less influence than positive party identity or ideology. Rarely can political attitudes be explained mainly by the effects of the media. We have known this since the weekly studies by Lazarsfeld and Merton (1969) and their theory on limited effects were published. However, we can state that the media can exacerbate or magnify attitudes which were already conditioned by the context of the individuals, the group to which they belong to, their predisposition and their involvement in politics.

Just as what happens with any study on public opinion, some of the limitations of this study are the period of time for which data was collected and the fact that it was limited to Spain. Nevertheless, the results obtained may be built on with new lines of research focused on issues such as what amount of different kinds of news media (television, social networks and digital newspapers) needs to be consumed in order to exacerbate our attitudes, and individual affective polarisation towards parties and their leaders. The consumption thresholds may shed some light on the extent to which these media effect us. New research must look at the questions How much, and where in order to differentiate the effects of some types of media from others within a general framework of analysis for new diets.

5. Contributions

Contributions	Author 1	Author 2	Author 3	Author 4
Conceptualisation	X	X	X	X
Data curation		X		
Formal analysis				X
Fundraising	X			
Research	X	X	X	X
Methodology			X	X
Project management	X	X		
Resources	X			
Software			X	X
Supervision	X			
Validation	X		X	
Visualisation			X	X
Writing: original draft	X	X	X	X
Writing: proofreading and editing	X	X	X	X

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7. Declaration of Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare they have no conflicts of interest.

8. Materials

The permanent url for the database is: <https://www.cemopmurcia.es/estudios/ii-encuesta-nacional-de-polarizacion-politica/>

The permanent URL for the questionnaire used is: <https://www.cemopmurcia.es/estudios/ii-encuesta-nacional-de-polarizacion-politica/>

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10. Notes

1. The database of this study as well as the questionnaire and the technical data sheet may be consulted by clicking on the following link: <https://www.cemopmurcia.es/estudios/ii-encuesta-nacional-de-polarizacion-politica/>

2. The analysis of variance test (ANOVA) enables the differences in the averages observed to be estimated with a metric variable (factor) between independent groups k ($+2$) is statistically significant or not. In this event, the idea is to conclude whether the affective polarisation average varies significantly between the groups defined according to how often the media are consumed. However, the test is supplemented with a post-hoc analysis in which there are many different comparisons for specifying between which category pairs there are really differences in averages, as these cannot be seen with the initial results from ANOVA.

3. The multiple linear regression models are applied to explain changes in a metric dependent variable (such as affective polarisation) by considering the effect of multiple independent variables which, in turn, are controlled among each other. Unlike the bivariate contrast tests, the multivariate regression analysis enables variables to be predicted according to the simultaneous effect of different factors. This is particularly recommended in social phenomena in which we have a system that is difficult to explain. The linear regression coefficients tell us when the p-value is significant. This is shown by the change the dependent variable undergoes when the values for each independent variable change.

4. Model 1b explains 49.7% of the variance in individual affective polarisation taking the evaluation of the parties as a reference point. The equation for both models is significant (F model 1=118.434 $p<0.01$; F model 2=93.302 $p<0.01$). The possibility there might be multicollinearity is analysed with the variance inflation factor (VIF) and in no event are values over 5 observed.

5. Model 1b explains 38.0% of the variance in individual affective polarisation taking the evaluation of the leaders as a reference point. The equation for both models is significant (F model 1=64.685 $p<0.01$; F model 2=54.494 $p<0.01$). The possibility there might be multicollinearity is analysed with the variance inflation factor (VIF) and in no event are values over 5 observed.